

SARAH MONZON

a novel

ALL'S  
FAIR IN  
LOVE AND  
CHRISTMAS





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BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Monzon, Sarah, author.

Title: All's fair in love and Christmas / Sarah Monzon.

Other titles: All is fair in love and Christmas

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023]

Identifiers: LCCN 2023002700 | ISBN 9780764242052 (trade paper) | ISBN 9780764242601 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493444052 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Romance fiction. | Christmas fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3613.O5496 A79 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230320

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023002700>

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Cover design and illustration by Mary Ann Smith

Author is represented by the Rachel McMillan Agency.

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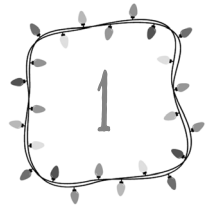
23 24 25 26 27 28 29      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## FOR JOSÉ,

whose favorite pastime when we met was to see  
how many shades of red you could turn my cheeks.

All these years later, you still make me blush.

I love you.



**M**y boss is so generous. She gave me three whole days to *look forward* to our meeting this morning. Isn't that just the sweetest, most considerate employer of all time? In my *anticipation*, I've spent the last seventy-two hours having no less than a dozen one-on-ones with her in my mind. After all, she never said what the meeting was in regard to, only that she wanted to talk to me about something important on Friday morning.

My mental scripts have ranged from approaching her office like a recalcitrant student about to be reprimanded by a stern principal (which isn't really fair, as Sofiya Bondaruk is more like Glinda the Good Witch in *The Wizard of Oz* than Ed Rooney from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*) to the even more improbable scenario my housemate, coworker, and best friend, Keri, speculated—the promotion that always seems to take place around the holidays.

In the cases of extremes, the answer usually lies somewhere in the middle. I just haven't been able to figure out what that middle is, and it's spiking my anxiety.

The clock on my computer screen ticks off another minute. I

take a deep breath and stand, my momentum pushing my rolling office chair a little too far out behind me. It crashes into the long table used as a second row of communal desks.

I flinch, heat blooming in my cheeks as if an invisible spotlight burns down on me. I duck my head so I don't have to see my coworkers staring over their MacBooks. If Kryptonite is Superman's weakness, then being on the receiving end of the attention of others is mine. Even now, pinpricks of uncomfortable awareness press into my skin, as if Lincoln, Frank, and Rosa's gazes were needles that could actually pierce flesh.

Quietly, and as unobtrusively as I can, I push the chair back where it belongs and straighten my maroon sweater dress. Like it or not, it's time to face my boss and get this meeting over with.

The tips of my brown leather ankle boots bob in and out of my view of the polished concrete floor as I make my way from the industrial-sized main working space to Sofiya's office. I look up in the nick of time to avoid colliding with a pair of broad shoulders encased in a perfectly ironed button-up dress shirt. Even before the man with impeccable taste turns and looks down at me with brown eyes that have a ring of amber around the pupil, I know who the shoulders belong to.

Jeremy Fletcher.

Up close and personal.

A queer feeling twists low in my gut.

Usually, my glimpses of Jeremy are furtive. Quick, secretive snatches no one sees that I tuck away to be pulled out in private. We've worked together for almost two years. Which means I've been pathetically pining over this elite specimen of a man for nearly as long. The same amount of time that he's barely been aware of my existence.

We've talked before, of course. If you count me barely squeaking out a *thank you* after he's opened the door for me as satisfactory interactions. But while I've hardly said more than two words to Jeremy in as many years, I've had innumerable con-

versations with him in my head. In those instances, I've always been impossibly witty, undeniably charming, and not the least bit tongue-tied.

So basically, my complete opposite in real life.

Jeremy tilts his head toward Sofiya's closed door. His layered brown hair sweeps in a perfect wave over his brow, every strand in place. I've read in books about heroines seeing a man's hair and wanting to run their fingers through it and tousle the strands. The idea seems almost like sacrilege to me. Jeremy is sculpted perfection. Why would I want to dishevel him?

He looks back at me and lowers his voice. "Know what this is about? Why Sofiya wants to see us?"

I open and close my mouth like a baby guppy. It's really not that hard to talk. Until you're put on the spot and someone is looking at you expectantly. My brain finds that too much pressure to function under.

The door swings open, and Sofiya stands on the other side, beaming at us with a glint in her eye.

If my boss wasn't the sweetest woman on the planet, I might be more scared of her. Forget every caricature of an office boss a la *The Devil Wears Prada* and think more along the lines of a Russian Cinderella. Tall and willowy with long, light-blond hair and skin like porcelain with a natural blush highlighting her prominent cheekbones. Even as Sofiya nears sixty-nine, her complexion is flawless. The kindness shining out of her pale blue eyes belies the inner strength I know she possesses.

"There you two are. Come in and sit down." She pivots and heads to her desk.

Jeremy moves to the side so I can enter the office first. I claim the seat on the left, and a moment later he lowers himself into the other chair on my right. It takes all my willpower, but I keep my fingers from fidgeting on my lap. My eyes, however, don't know where to land. My gaze bounces around the office, catching first on a Better Business Bureau award nailed to the wall behind

Sofiya's desk before flitting off to the layer of dust collected on the fake rubber plant in the corner.

Sofiya smiles warmly at us. "How are you two doing this morning?"

Oh, yay. Small talk. My favorite.

I force a smile and say *good* even though my insides are twisted into a knot because I still haven't figured out what this meeting is about, even after three days of obsession.

Jeremy props an ankle over his opposite knee, physically relaxed and showing zero signs that he's worried about the outcome of the next few minutes. "It's been a crazy morning already, but that just means the day can only get better, right? What about you? Did you enjoy the orchestra last night?"

They go back and forth for a few minutes, conversation flowing comfortably between them while I wilt into the office chair's cushioned seat.

"So, you may be wondering why I requested a meeting this morning." Sofiya's words put immediate starch back in my spine.

Jeremy chuckles. "I was just asking Mackenzie that very thing when you opened the door."

Her eyes bounce to me, the curve of her lips suppressed to a smile instead of the wide grin it wants to be. I still, hoping she doesn't expect me to respond in any way.

With a small chuckle, Sofiya sits back. "Well, I won't make you wait any longer. The reason I wanted to talk to you both is because there's a new position opening up in the firm, and with the strengths you two individually bring to the table, I'm confident that either one of you would be an asset in the role. It's a supervisory position, but you both have shown leadership skills in the past. There will be more interaction with our clients than either of you may have experienced, but again, I think both of you are up to the task." She regards each of us in turn. "The hard part, really, is going to be deciding between you two for the job."



My lungs expel air. Keri was right? The last three days of worry were about a promotion? I guess I shouldn't have been so skeptical. I just didn't think I'd ever be a candidate. Not when I can't intelligibly talk to our clients outside of email. But the holiday season is always when employees move up at Limitless Designs.

And for reasons none of us can figure out, the person with the most Christmas cheer gets the advancement.

*Every single time.*

Sofiya extends her hand first to Jeremy and then to me. "I'll let you know my decision right after the holiday." Her phone rings, and she apologizes before answering.

I glance surreptitiously at Jeremy as he stands. Sofiya has effectively turned my secret office crush into my not-so-secret office rival. No doubt he is overjoyed by the possibility of a promotion. After all, that would be the normal reaction. The hollow pit in my stomach feels more like dread than joy, however.

It only takes that glance to prove what I already know: Jeremy Fletcher is put together, competent, and a shoo-in for this promotion. I am a hot mess and should throw in my red velvet Santa hat here and now.

Jeremy pauses once the office door is closed behind us. The sounds of our coworkers click-clacking away on their keyboards is the base soundtrack to most of my day and instantly brings me a sense of relief. As soon as I get back to my computer, I can bury my head in the proverbial sand of InDesign and finish the brochures for the Milwaukee Wilderness Group.

"Good luck," Jeremy says, his voice a rich timbre that doesn't hold even an ounce of mocking rivalry. Instead, he sounds . . . sincere.

I look up so I won't be talking to his middle button when I respond. I've never had a reason for such proximity before and have certainly never fabricated one. I'm more of the admire-from-afar type. Once upon a time, I'd have been considered a

wallflower, which sounds so much better than the truth—that I'm still experiencing the shyness my parents swore I'd grow out of. Thirty-three years old and still waiting for a birthday to come around when I can unwrap the gift of not being awkward in social situations.

I open my mouth, but to my horror, an unintelligible sound slurs from my lips before I can clamp them closed.

Jeremy's brows pull low. But then the corner of his mouth quirks up. "See ya around, Mackenzie." He slips his fingers into his front pockets and strides away.

A flash of canary yellow enters my peripheral vision a second before Keri steps in front of me.

"Well?" she asks, eyes wide.

My shoulders slump. "I'm an idiot."

"Don't talk about my best friend that way." She plants her hands on her hips.

"Even if it's true?"

"Lies!"

I look over Keri's shoulder as Jeremy turns the corner, disappearing from view. This isn't the first impression I've made on Jeremy, but before, I could take comfort in knowing I'd presented myself with quiet professionalism. I was okay with my position of nameless coworker, feeding my hidden feelings without any real-life interaction. But now everything has changed.

Keri hooks her arm through mine and tugs. "Stairwell. Now."

Since our office is on the ninth floor, no one takes the stairs. That abandoned corner of the building has become our echoey space when we need a few stolen moments and don't want to be overheard.

Keri pushes on the metal exit bar to open the heavy door to the stairs. The air is cooler, with no heat circulating in the small but tall space. The latch clicks behind us, and Keri twirls, the yellow skirt of her vintage dress spiraling out over her petti-

coats. I told her once she reminds me of Mary Tyler Moore from *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and she'd given me a beaming smile.

"Tell me everything."

I sigh and sit on the top stair heading down to the eighth floor. Keri gathers her skirts and gingerly settles next to me.

"Jeremy Fletcher and I are officially competing for the same promotion."

She nudges my shoulder with hers. "This is good news, Kenz. You should be celebrating, not looking like your cat just died. You know what you have to do to win the promotion. You're practically an honorary elf, so this will be easy for you."

But my favorite parts of Christmas are the Secret Santa parts. Emphasis on *secret*. I can crank up Mariah Carey or Nat King Cole and rock out to them in my car. Bake dozens of sugar cookies and gingerbread men and drop them off at my neighbor's in-house daycare for the children to decorate. Fill up the Toys for Tots bin at the store and imagine a marine in uniform making a kid's day on Christmas morning. Build a snowman in the memory care facility's yard.

None of these things requires me to speak to multiple people or draw any sort of attention to myself.

Christmas should be twinkle lights and snowflake kisses. Magic sprinkled in the air like sugar on holiday cookies. The spirit of the season is supposed to work like a Magic Eraser on the stresses and doldrums of everyday life. It's the something special that happens when Jack Frost nips at your nose and when the nostalgia of music played only one time of year harmonizes with the Salvation Army bell ringers to bring a perfect pitch to the world's favorite holiday.

But instead of a Hallmark Channel marathon of festive magic, Sofiya is taking something good and joyous and making it into her own production of *Christmas Wars: Office Edition*.

"Have you ever wondered why Sofiya always does promotions

around the holidays and then awards the job to the person with the most Christmas spirit?" Keri's accustomed to carrying more than her fair share of the conversation. It's one of the reasons we're such good friends. "I mean, the first year, I thought it was merely a coincidence. But it keeps happening. It's turned into a competition for who can out-Christmas the other person, not necessarily who is better for the job."

"I think it has something to do with her childhood."

Keri looks at me, her bright red lips perched to the side. "What do you mean?"

I pick my words carefully. Too many times I've said something and the meaning came across differently than I intended. "Well, she's kind of like the Grinch."

Keri's forehead scrunches. "But Sofiya is the sweetest. She loves Christmas more than anyone I know."

See? "You're right. She's the best. I didn't mean she's the Grinch because she's grumpy. More like . . ." I pause, searching. "They share a similar history."

She considers this. "I'm not sure I know the Grinch's backstory. Just that he's a mean one, he's a heel, and you don't want to touch him with a thirty-nine-and-a-half-foot pole. Oh, and his heart grows three sizes."

I smile at her. "Well, in the book, no one knows why he has a grudge against Christmas, just that all the carolers and merrymaking and joy are a trigger that sets off his holiday hatred. The movies have attempted to fill in the gap with a tragic tale of an unwanted orphan, abandoned, just wanting to be loved and accepted. Christmas became the symbol of his rejection and loneliness, especially backlit by everyone else's family celebrations and happiness."

She taps her fingers on her knee. "Okay, I'm following. Keep going."

"The Grinch tried to steal everyone's holiday so they could experience the emptiness he felt growing up, while Sofiya—"

Understanding dawns in Keri's expression. "Sofiya overcompensates the lack of Christmas joy in her past by rewarding those who can fill that void." She leans in, whispering even though we are the only two people in the stairwell. "Do you think she even knows she's doing it?"

Maybe other bosses manipulated their employees for personal reasons, but not Sofiya. "She's probably operating on a subconscious level."

"Are you going to talk to her about it?"

That doesn't deserve a response. I give Keri a look I know she can decipher.

"Right. Awkward conversations. What was I thinking?"

Keri doesn't get it because she has no problem talking to anyone. Meanwhile I'd rather spend three hours Googling the answer to a question than three minutes on the phone asking the same question.

"I think I'll just bow out. Jeremy deserves the promotion, plus he'll do a better job than I would. The position requires leadership skills and direct communication with our clients. I'd probably lose the company more accounts than anything. You know how I am."

Keri lays a hand on my arm. "Mackenzie, you can't quit."

"Not quit, just not jump through Sofiya's hoops."

"You might not have a choice." She holds my gaze, her eyes round and soft. She reaches into a deep side pocket, pulling out an envelope, which she gives me.

I look down at the white rectangle in my hand, recognizing the return address immediately as Heritage Hills. My palms grow sweaty, and I fumble with the seal.

"I checked the mail slot this morning before we left," Keri explains, "but I didn't want any bad news to cloud your head before your meeting, so I held on to it."

I flip open the paper and read, my stomach dropping. "Her

insurance won't cover as much as I hoped. Keri, I can't afford my mom's care."

She squeezes my arm. "You can if you get the promotion. It comes with a significant raise. I saw the budget proposal myself."

I sigh as my heart plummets. Whether I like it or not, I have no choice but to play Sofiya's reindeer games.

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